

The Prairie's Culture: The Architectural Identity of the Midwest

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What is architecture? Some would say it is an engineering science, while others think of it as pure art. According to Frank Lloyd Wright, one of America's most famed architects, "architecture is the scientific art of making structure express ideas." Prairie style architecture illustrates this idea brilliantly. Frank Lloyd Wright had been looking, at the turn of the century, for a way of building that combined beauty and function and demonstrated his ideals to the world. He and a group of architects known as the Prairie School came up with it in Wright's own Oak Park studio. But Prairie style architecture became not just a creative and beautiful way of building, but an art that stands for Wright's ideas and for the Midwest, especially Illinois, promoting the values of the traditional family, honoring the prairie landscape, and representing the midwestern spirit and culture.

Prairie style houses hold the traditional family together and promote its values in many subtle ways. Wright believed very strongly that buildings have an enormous impact on their inhabitants. For this reason he used his architecture to try to save the midwestern family, which had started to fall apart because of the so-called "boxes," or closed rooms, of Victorian architecture. In fact the biggest factor in holding together the family is the wide, open spaces of his dwellings. This design causes family members to come in contact much more, and does not allow them to hide from each other in rigidly enclosed, one-purpose rooms. This contributes significantly to uniting the family. Rooms in Prairie style homes have rectilinear furniture and structures, and the art has a natural beauty and seriousness to it. According to Wright, this construction makes for a fancy, yet simple ritualistic room that is approached almost as a temple where standards of behavior have to be upheld. This too keeps the family together. Prairie style

homes also seem to hide themselves, to protect the family from the outside world. They do this with the smallness of the front door, the wide overhangs of the roof, and the narrow, hiding windows. These features suggest seclusion from society that lay beyond the safety and shelter of the home and the family within. In these ways Wright used the effect of houses on inhabitants to promote something he thought very important, the values of the traditional midwestern family and the sheltering of it from the sometimes frightening real world.

As its name implies, Prairie Style architecture represents the magical prairie landscape of the Midwest. Frank Lloyd Wright had a deep personal love for the prairie, due mainly to his upbringing. He grew up with nature around him, and his relatives, who were mostly farmers, nurtured this appreciation of nature in him as a young boy. Wright thought the prairie was like the American spirit: courageous, independent, and practical. Because of this and his love for it, Wright wanted to show the prairie in his architecture. He therefore designed his houses to embody the values and the features of the prairie through various characteristics he gave to his designs. The low-lying form of a Prairie style house and its flat roof depict the sharp contrast between the swaying prairie grasses and the calm midwest sky. Prairie style uses natural colors and materials, which also contribute to its symbolism of the prairie. Another attribute of Prairie style houses are the high ribbon windows, which make for indirect lighting, copying the prairie's tint. Finally, the beautiful art in Prairie style houses, much of it by Wright, utilizes simple, geometric shapes which, when combined with the characteristics stated, can only remind one of the prairie. The midwestern landscape, rich in symbolism, is certainly the biggest inspiration for Prairie style architecture.

Frank Lloyd Wright felt he needed to express his fondness for midwest culture as well in his work. He thought the midwestern spirit has sincerity, fortitude, and integrity and that the culture

is very strong and stable. These virtues are presented in Prairie style buildings through their unique characteristics. The weighted brick constructions and heavy masses of the houses, anchoring them to the ground, convey the strength and stability of midwest culture. It also makes the houses seem to rise from the ground, symbolizing fortitude. Wright believed very strongly that houses should be truthful; hence, he developed Prairie style buildings to use basic forms and be very honest in their forms. They were honest because their exteriors reflected their interiors, and this is how they represented the sincerity and integrity of midwestern culture. Thus Prairie style's spirit originated in the midwestern culture because of Frank Lloyd Wright's devotion to it and his strong beliefs about it.

Promoting the traditional family and its values, the prairie, and midwestern culture make up the tenets of Prairie style architecture. An appreciation for these was the aim Frank Lloyd Wright had when he designed the style, and Prairie style has achieved this. To convince people of their beauty and meaning, Wright incorporated various unique characteristics into his architecture that portrayed these ideas. And so, we discover that Prairie Style architecture has become more than just beautiful art, but it is an entity with a meaningful personality and goals of its own, living on through the buildings of Frank Lloyd Wright. [From Melanie Birk, *Frank Lloyd Wright and the Prairie*; "The American Prairie Style (1890-1918)," <http://www.bozzle.com/perPrairie.html> (Oct. 13, 2003); "The Prairie Style," <http://architecture.about.com/library/bl-prairie.htm> (Oct. 7, 2003); "The Prairie Style 1900-1912: Wright's 'Golden Innocence'," http://xroads.virginia.edu/~CLASS/am483_95/projects/wright/prayer.html (Oct. 13, 2003).]